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Improving the social protection needs of asylum seekers and refugees

Learning from the experiences of displaced Sudanese in the Netherlands

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Policy recommendations

\ Governments should facilitate paid work to asylum seekers from day one

Asylum seekers often spend months, if not years, in the asylum seeking process with limited access to work. This affects them on multiple levels. Allowing them to work from the beginning of the asylum process in the host country would benefit the asylum seekers, their families and the host state. .

\ Speed up and facilitate the recognition of academic certificates.

Establishing fast-track programmes that allow refugees to undergo a qualifications validation process of their academic certificates would significantly reduce the time it takes for them to be incorporated in the labour market.

\ Incentivise internship and volunteer work (when paid work is not possible).

Unpaid internships and the unclear rewards of volunteer jobs during the asylum process and even after obtaining refugee status lead many people to remain idle or engage in the informal market. To avoid these situations, European governments should find ways to incentivise internships and volunteer work for asylum seekers and refugees. A way to do this would be, for example, to reward this type of work by allowing them to spend more time back home without having their social security rights penalised.

Improving the social protection needs of asylum seekers and refugees

In Dutch society, as well as internationally, the arrival and reception of refugees and asylum seekers in the past decades have triggered heated debates among scholars, policymakers, the media and the general public on how to best balance the cost-conscious and human sides of reception (Ghorashi, de Boer & ten Holder, 2018). On the one hand, since asylum seekers and refugees are frequently the victims of violence and force, it is often assumed that they have little or no agency, and they are often seen as passive victims in need of support. The humanitarian commitment to protect those who are “unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of persecution” (Geneva Convention, in UNHCR, 2010)¹, obliges the receiving society to provide refugees and asylum seekers with temporary protection, yet with little emphasis on their integration in the host society and labour market. On the other hand, however, they are depicted as dependents—and even abusers—of welfare states and organisations, being a burden on their host societies (Ghorashi, de Boer & ten Holder, 2018). Especially in the context of highly-regulated states with strict immigration controls and a robust welfare system, such as the Netherlands or Germany, this image of helplessness is stronger and tends to be—unintended—reinforced.

In the Netherlands, refugees are often treated like other weak groups in need of protection, such as children or disabled people. Once refugee status has been granted, they must go through a long re-socialisation process into the host society (van Heelsum, 2017). Such a process, coupled with the lengthy waiting periods—often for years—in the reception centres with limited personal development and restrained social interactions with the outside world, delays their access to the labour market, which hinders them from building a livelihood perspective after receiving their formal status and limits unfolding their own full economic and social potential (Serra-Mingot & Mazzucato, 2019). Paradoxically, while the welfare system makes refugees dependants of the state for several years, reducing their confidence and ability to (re)gain resources to integrate into the labour market, it also

blames them for such dependency when, having been granted refugee status, they are unable or unwilling to find a job, or rather to work in *any* job that is offered to them.

In 2017, 7,199 Sudanese were registered in the Netherlands (CBS, 2018). Sudanese migration to the Netherlands peaked between 1996 and 2004 when the total number of Sudanese officially living in the country increased from 943 to 7,626, most of whom arrived seeking asylum (CBS, 2018). Since then, the Sudanese population in the Netherlands has decreased significantly. Such a decrease might be due to the combination of two factors: a) the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Sudan in 2005, which technically ended decades of civil war, and b) the tightening of Dutch migration and asylum policies in the early 2000s, due to increasing public dissatisfaction with the growing number of asylum seekers. A large part of the population also believed that many were not ‘real refugees’ (Ghorashi, 2005). Moreover, together with other migrant groups of refugee background, such as Somalis, there have been significant migration flows of Sudanese from the Netherlands to the United Kingdom, after having obtained their Dutch nationality, which might have affected the number of Sudanese in the Netherlands.

The Sudanese population in the Netherlands is male-dominated and relatively young, with 36 per cent 20 years old and younger, 54 per cent between 20 and 50 years old and only 10 per cent older than 50 years (CBS, 2018). The educational background of many (northern) Sudanese who arrived in Europe from 1989 onwards is relatively high—the Sudanese middle class was the main target of the Islamist regime after the coup. The civil service throughout the country was purged, and a high number of professionals were dismissed from their jobs (Abusabib, 2007). Research conducted in 2006 in the Netherlands showed that the education levels of Sudanese refugees were higher than those of other African groups, with 30.2 per cent of Sudanese asylum seekers holding university degrees (van Heelsum & Hessels, 2005).

¹ \ Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html>

This *Policy Brief* shows not only the contradictory manner in which Western governments have dealt with demands of control, low costs and humanitarian approaches but also the negative consequences this has for the asylum seekers and refugees, their families and the receiving state. Even when the welfare state covers the basic needs of social protection of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands, their ability to work and build professional perspectives continues to be very limited. The frustration of not being able to support themselves by working in the profession they qualified in, and their inability to support their families leads to psychological distress. It is also exacerbated by them often having to work in unskilled jobs, which ultimately hinders their socio-economic integration in the country and creates more dependency on the welfare state. Based on the Dutch case, this *Policy Brief* provides a series of policy recommendations, which might also be useful for other European countries.

Governments should facilitate paid work from day one

Whereas many European countries fully provide for the basic needs of asylum-seekers, their access to the formal labour market and education is rather limited (Bakker, Cheung & Phillimore, 2016). This is because in the Netherlands, like in other European countries, such as in Germany (Christ, 2020), authorities are concerned that by granting them the right to work they would settle and integrate before they are officially admitted, so deportation would become more difficult (van Heelsum, 2017). At the time of conducting this research in the Netherlands, only those who had spent at least six months at the reception centres were allowed to work for a maximum of 24 weeks a year. Yet, if they did so, they had to financially contribute to the accommodation costs for the reception facilities and the monetary allowance, whereby the maximum amount they could keep was around €185 per month. These circumstances discourage many from seeking work.

The lengthy waiting periods in the reception centres with limited personal development, lack of reasonably well-paid employment and restrained social interactions with the outside world, reduces refugees' confidence and their ability to (re)gain the resources they need to integrate into the labour market once their asylum request has been granted, creating, thus, an ongoing dependence on the state (Ghorashi, 2005). Moreover, the lack of employment possibilities during the asylum process creates a gap in the refugees' CVs, which can be detrimental to finding a regular job once they are allowed to apply for one.

Box 1

*The case of Mohamed**

Mohamed (46) arrived in the Netherlands seeking asylum in 2003. Thirteen years later, he is still undocumented. Although he has been unable to work formally since 2010, he has been informally providing translation and other services for newly arrived asylum seekers for both the municipality and an NGO. Although Mohamed's work is invaluable to staff members at the NGO and the municipality, their hands are tied when it comes to giving him a formal employment contract, so in exchange, they supported him by providing him with accommodation and healthcare. Whereas Mohamed could rarely send monetary remittances back home, his access to healthcare through the NGO allowed him to obtain medication and equipment to treat his diabetes. Rather than using the recommended daily injections, Mohamed saved a couple of them every week and sent them to his mother, who could not afford proper diabetes medication in Sudan. This duty to support his family, however, took a toll on his own mental and physical health.

* Names in Box 1 and Box 2 have been changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees

During this time of wait, asylum seekers not only lose their skills, their mental health also suffers as they are unable to financially support their families back home, who are often dependent on them (see Box 1). Following from this, it would be advisable to offer them the possibility to work from day one, rather than pushing people to be dependent on welfare for such a long time.

Allowing them to work from the day they arrive is also beneficial for the host state. By allowing asylum seekers to work in the formal sector, they would contribute to the social security system in the host country. Moreover, they would stop being “a burden” for the state, undercutting thus the anti-refugee debates on the costs they pose to the state.

Speed up and facilitate the recognition of academic certificates

Once refugee status is granted, refugees are legally allowed to work. While no formal restrictions prevent refugees' from accessing the labour market, many have pointed to the lack of, or limited, employment opportunities as a crucial problem (Moret, Baglioni & Efionayi-Mäder, 2006). Besides the gap in their CV during the asylum process, Dutch employers often do not (fully) recognise refugees' professional training and education in their home country. This fact results in that they must either do jobs for which they are over-skilled or spend a substantial amount of time (sometimes years) to fully or partially re-train and join the labour market. Whereas some organisations and foundations, such as the Dutch Council for Refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk) and the Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF), offer additional schooling to validate their degrees or start one from scratch, age thresholds limit the access of many refugees to University education, which forces them to remain in the low-skilled job markets.

Besides being a highly frustrating situation for the refugees themselves, it is also a waste of human capital and resources for the states. Germany is a good example of this, where it was estimated² that 14,000 foreign doctors in Germany were awaiting validation. Against the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent need for medical staff, some German federal states called for speeding up the certificate validation process of doctors with a migrant background, many of whom were refugees.

Establishing fast-track programmes that allow refugees to undergo a qualifications validation process, that provide country-specific additional professional training, occupation-specific language courses and/or internships simultaneously, would significantly reduce the time it takes for highly skilled refugees to become part of the labour market and be integrated into the host society.

Incentivise internship and volunteer work (when paid work is not possible)

Together with the limitations mentioned earlier, the negative media attention on refugees and the lack of a robust professional network also play a crucial role in limiting refugees' and asylum seekers' access to the labour market. Acquaintances are critical for getting jobs in the Netherlands, which is why the Dutch Council for Refugees and the UAF offer some support by trying to connect refugees with local companies, giving them the opportunity to learn Dutch, or providing them with some sort of internship or volunteer jobs.

Once they were granted refugee status, many respondents in this study were offered the possibility to conduct (often unpaid) internships or volunteer jobs to gain work experience and improve their Dutch language skills. While some of them accepted these offers and worked in jobs, such as apple-picking, gardening, or taking care of the elderly, none of them benefitted by finding a job that fulfilled their aspirations. This led to increased dissatisfaction, which in many cases resulted in onward migration to the United Kingdom, where many (especially women) found a more satisfactory job that allowed them to move upwards in their careers (see Box 2). In failing to offer sufficient professional opportunities, the resources invested by the Dutch government throughout the asylum system and afterwards can be considered as wasted for the Dutch state.

2 \ <https://www.businessinsider.de/politik/deutschland/sonderregelung-in-der-coronakrise-erste-bundeslaender-rekrutieren-tausende-auslaendische-aerzte/>

Box 2**The case of Fatima**

Fatima (46), one of the respondents in this research, worked as a volunteer for nine months holding on to her employer's promise to give her a proper job contract soon, which in the end never happened. Although she held a Master's degree from a European University, she ended up working as a cleaner, until she felt so frustrated and degraded as a person that she decided to move to the United Kingdom, where she soon found a fulfilling job as a social worker.

To ensure a return on their investments, the Dutch state could and should find ways to incentivise volunteer work for asylum seekers and refugees. First, internships and volunteer jobs are useful to speed up the integration of refugees in the host country to avoid their exploitation (see Box 2). Second, internships should be limited in time, after which companies should either properly hire the person or stop having interns. Third, internships and especially volunteer jobs for asylum seekers and refugees should be mutually beneficial, i.e. they should help people learn the language and integrate into Dutch society. After all, chances to improve one's language skills or understand Dutch society by picking apples in a remote field are highly doubtful.

Finally, internships and volunteer work for refugees and asylum seekers should be rewarded in cash or in-kind. One possible in-kind reward of voluntary jobs would be to allow these individuals to spend more time back home once they obtain Dutch citizenship without having their social security rights penalised. It is important to bear in mind that many refugees do not remain refugees forever. Depending on the case, after a certain amount of time, refugees often receive Dutch citizenship. While some remain in the Netherlands, others move onwards to another country (see Box 2). Some others might return, permanently or temporarily, to their countries if the reason that pushed them to flee does not exist anymore. As the research showed, family responsibilities back home were often at odds with the employment status in the Netherlands. In particular, the (health-) care needs of the refugees' elderly parents often became a major source of concern. Medical care in Sudan is expensive,

and many refugees who depend on social assistance or are in unskilled jobs are not able to support their families financially. In many of these cases, the best (if not the only) way in which many people can help their ageing parents is by travelling back to Sudan and providing hands-on care. In doing so, they must leave their job (if they have one) or stop receiving their social assistance (e.g. receiving social assistance is bound to regular visits to the unemployment office). Many respondents in this study found themselves in this situation, which led them to adopt rushed and often unsustainable solutions. For instance, some of them would move their whole family, including the children, to Sudan to take care of an elderly relative. This sudden move often harmed the children's well-being, since it disrupted their education and slowed their learning process in Sudan.

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